

# PUSHING WATER UPHILL

Jean Grow, PhD

*“You know it’s all privilege.  
Whiteness. Being rich. Being male.  
That’s still how power is settled in this country.  
So, if you don’t get white men engaged in the process  
I think you’re pushing water uphill.”*

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Given this moment, with all its tension and ripe with possibility, these words ring truer than ever. Embracing that truth, this exploration of the Time’s Up/Advertising (TU/A) movement, which pushes back against sexual harassment and gender bias, represents the perspectives of 17 men - allies of the women who launched TU/A. But why just 17? Men are silent for many reasons. Some are bent on protecting their privilege. Privilege they often refuse to acknowledge. Others feel lost in this moment and so “mostly avoid” hard conversations. Still others want to engage in discussions but “are frozen.” Trapped by fear. Regardless of their reason, male privilege allows men safety in their silence. While, safety in silence is simply not a luxury afforded to women.

*“It’s about us and what we’ve done and, more specially,  
what we have not done.”*

The men whose insights’ shape this white paper are all high-level advertising executives: CEOs, Chairmen, Presidents, Vice Presidents and Chief Diversity, HR, Creative or Strategy Officers. Each man was forthright, often empathetic and always passionate, qualities essential for driving change. The kind of change TU/A is advocating. To that end, this research explores three areas. Men’s **initial reactions to TU/A**. Their perceptions on **what’s been happening in the advertising industry**. And, the **role men can play in driving change**. Additionally, threaded throughout the discussions was the industry’s **pressing need for diversity**. While the next white paper will explore diversity in depth – bringing the voices of women and men together – I would be remiss not to speak of it here too. Because the time has come to speak truth and act.

*“Stop giving excuses. Stop the bullshit.”*

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## INITIAL REACTIONS

Often the men's first reaction was "it's about time." To many of them, TU/A "just made all the sense in the world." Despite its inevitability, the men were skeptical of both the movement itself and the industry's ability to change. "There are so many ways in which society and the advertising industry, work to keep us (men) in our little bubbles." Yet, despite their skepticism, which was fueled by what they often characterized as "industry-wide apprehension," these men expressed a deep hunger for change framed by systemic accountability. In the end, they are looking for "a common language" because "time's up for the way things used to be."

### *It's About Time*

- "It felt very much like an important conversation that needed to happen, not just in our industry, but in our culture as well."
- There was "a torrent of news about bad behavior, abhorrent behavior by men in many different industries" including advertising.
- "It was a validation of not just the existence of the problem, but an attempt to get to some solutions."

Yet, the question remains, "why didn't this happen sooner?" Put another way, why had the "media industry, at large, allowed for certain behaviors to go unchecked?" Given that men hold much of the power, it's fair to say the responsibility for why it went unchecked for so long is on them. So, it should be no surprise that men are skeptical.

### *Skepticism*

- "It just seemed like a way for very senior executive women to get in on it without having to slum around with Diet Madison Avenue."
- "Is this a commitment we're making together or just, you know, pledging solidarity to the cause?"
- "You'd got to accept that there's some kind of systemic cultural, an agency system, that keeps women from making it to the top."

Their skepticism, ironically, appears rooted in a tacit acknowledgement of the patriarchal structures, "the agency system," that underpins "archaic behavior." Yet, the idea that there would be a "one-size fits all fix without really exploring the nuances" troubled them. "How do you create space for everyone." That, frankly, is the question at the heart of what is holding advertising back. Creating that space, starts with systemic accountability.

### *Systemic Accountability*

- We need to "make sure that we're more data driven in how we're making decisions."
- "Look at holding companies and ask, why are there not more women leaders? Why are there not more women CEOs?"
- "If somebody crosses the line you must have the language, protocols and institutional commitment. You need leadership to be able to take that on and change it."

Systemic accountability is about "leveling the playing field" and "pledging solidarity to the cause," while building a sense of "belonging to a common culture." These men want to see "a clear path to solving some of the systemic issues," which will allow for "a commitment from an industry standpoint." To that end, there must be "transparency and a culture of curability, while at the same time "holding clients accountable."

*"My wish is that Time's Up becomes something that we don't need."*

## WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING IN ADVERTISING

It is not news that advertising has been a “boys’ club” since its inception. What is new is that 17 men, men at the top of this elite club, were willing to candidly speak about it. Their insights about what is happening in advertising today, highlight four themes. They acknowledge that the systemic structure of advertising has often perpetuated bad behavior. They also spoke about owning their part in the problem of systemic gender inequity. At the same time, they worry that TU/A is losing momentum. These executives also saw the problem of sexual harassment and gender inequity as bigger than the advertising industry.

### *It's Bigger Than Advertising*

- “There’s a societal problem that’s very obvious... particularly how young boys are brought up.”
- “There’s a much deeper unconsciousness... societal, across corporate culture and within advertising.”
- There’s a “need for a level playing field... (removing) the people who are really at the core of this and epitomize the problem.”
- “What is lacking in advertising and in our society is a true north star.”

Clearly sexual harassment and gender inequality are not unique to advertising. And Time’s Up did not begin with advertising. Hollywood was where it launched. Nor has it ended with advertising. Healthcare was next. Further, sexism does not begin in adulthood. It begins in childhood. Advertising reflects society. So too does it shape society. This is an uncomfortable fact that many found hard to embrace. But, advertising bears a responsibility for rethinking the images it reflects and shapes. Because “boys will be boys” is no longer acceptable.

### *Boys Will Be Boys*

- When men look at what is happening, “I think it’s actually fairly painful.”
- “Listen to what women say about the atmosphere in your business and even about your own behavior.”
- “Creative departments which run like a religion with little proteges and disciples... Like the Catholic church.  
It’s hard to change that power structure.”
- “At some point you have to accept that every female on the planet has been a victim of some kind of harassment or inequality or worse...  
There’s just no way 10 percent of the male population perpetrated harm to all those women.”

HR has failed women while protecting men with power. So, it’s no surprise to hear that “women don’t believe that anything is really going to change.” Indeed, the advertising industry has let the problem of sexual harassment and gender bias go unchecked “for decades.” In fact, there has been “no call for swift correction.” Men need to own that problem and stop “moving people around and not dealing with them.”

### *Men Must Own This Problem*

- “Boys will be boys doesn’t start in the workplace. It starts when you’re five or six.”
- “You know the way we get together to celebrate things... the havoc it wreaks, that has controlled organizations for decades.”
- “It requires men to create a culture within men – amongst men – that it is not acceptable to do it.”
- “When legal and financial action was taken by the folks who were victims, I saw agencies swiftly make a change. That’s when things start becoming serious and real.”

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The bottom line is this. “Men need to stop enabling other men” and stop giving themselves, and the system they control, a pass. Men need to take responsibility for what many of them let happen. When “you don’t take action – there’s probably a personal reflection needed.” While reflections have their place, the industry is way past personal reflections. Men need to lead by owning that “this as a problem that began with them.” It’s not on women, alone, to fix.

## *TU/A Is Losing Momentum*

- “I’m a little concerned that the effort is splintering.”
- “My worry is that TU/A becomes the default. Oh, look we’ve hired a woman CEO. Everything is alright, which it is not.”
- “So now you’ve taken issues, that people have historically not wanted to talk about, and made them one-size-fits-all. That just won’t work”
- “There is a larger conversation we’re not having about how this whole thing works.”

Without that larger conversation “you get no sense of any real systemic change.” For the “unconscious men who epitomized the problem” and for an industry that, in many ways, remains “stuck in the past,” TU/A losing momentum would be no loss. To survive, TU/A needs to embrace intersectionality, while holding onto its core mission, “making gender equality the new normal.” That task will not be easy. And partnering with men to “really engage men in the conversation” will be essential.

*“Both of us are walking side-by-side.  
But white men are walking on a moving sidewalk.”*

## THE DIVERSITY THREAD

Diversity threaded its way across nearly every conversation, even when the question at hand was not about diversity, per se. The need for diversity is a driving force within the advertising industry, which surely reflects the mood of the country today. Yet, the problem within the advertising industry is the systemic structure. It’s antiquated and broken. That brokenness leads to resentment, which is often driven by fear. Disruption may be the advertising industry’s best hope.

### *Systemic Brokenness*

- “The broader industry is still predominantly white and that feels like another country to me,” shared a gay executive.
- “Discrimination against women and minorities has been woven so deeply into the fabric of this business that to untangle it is a momentous task.”
- “People aren’t seen as people. People are seen as tools. That exacerbates the problem.”
- “It’s a more systemic issue. How do you make sure you’re encouraging the right people to come into your industry?”

Systemic brokenness plagues the advertising industry. The lack of diversity is a symptom of a broader illness. Advertising is an industry that has closed itself off from the world, which clients play it to engage with and accurately represent. “Big holding companies, they’re dying.” And that’s not surprising. They are bogged down by archaic structures built on white privilege. “It’s not an excuse anymore to say they’re (diverse talent) difficult to find.” The clock is ticking.

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## *Resentment*

- “Women siphon off diversity.”
- “Women have taken much of the energy out of the diversity conversation.”
- “Programs targeting people of color are pushed down and resources have been shifted.”
- Diversity is “not coming to take your job. It is lifting up and ensuring that women and people of color all have the same opportunities that someone like myself – a straight white guy – has had my entire life.”
- “Everyone has just become their own siloes soldiers... It’s counterproductive.”

The renewed focus on diversity has made the movement to address gender inequities more fraught. Raising women up still is not a “fully intersectional win for the business. It’s not a true reflection of diversity.” And that lack of intersectionality is something that TU/A is going to have to address.

## *Disruption*

- “Disruptive companies hire primarily for cultural contribution and not for culture fit.”
- “It’s no longer about hiring my friends... But, rather search out people with differing opinions who can challenge me and push me.”
- “Ensure that CFOs have this (diversity) integrated into their monthly, quarterly, and annual reporting processes.”
- “Find (diverse) people and stop giving excuses. That’s the only way it gets solved.”
- “Women in the room. That’s not enough.”

In the end the men’s passionate plea for diversity is not surprising, given this moment of racial reckoning which has finally come to America. The advertising industry, creators and purveyors of culture, have a responsibly to embrace this moment. “Diversity is a competitive advantage.” That “cross pollination creates magic.” The magic that is necessary to save the advertising industry from itself. It’s on leaders, men and women, to “build a narrative around the outsized importance of diversity” and in the process build a better America.

*“Don’t hire yourself.”*

## THE ROLE MEN CAN PLAY

Change comes down to men playing their part to facilitate change. There are all the obvious things men can do, many have been discussed here and elsewhere. However, at a very personal level, men must “acknowledge the fear” that “still permeates organizations” and often negatively influences their willingness to get involved. To change the culture, men need to role-model something different and do it “man-to-man.” “We need to be open to vulnerability” and “teach younger men how to be men.” Men can play an “enormous role in changing advertising culture.” That begins by “not assuming that the norm is always the male perspective.” The same could be said about white culture. Yet, “things don’t change without some sort of gravity.” And that gravitational pull must lead to concrete, systematic initiatives.

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## *Acknowledge the Fear*

- “You don’t need to fill the space to mask your fear.”
- “Be brave about creating opportunity and being advocates for women.”
- “Accept the fact that there is unconscious bias, that there is gender inequality, that there is racial inequality.”
- “It’s more important that we have morality than worry about what is legal and illegal.”

The advertising industry can no longer afford to have men “just turn a blind eye.” This is especially true because men still hold the majority of power positions, especially within global holding companies. Yet, the legal initiatives that TU/A has facilitated, have caused some men, especially those who are perpetrators of sexual misconduct, to feel fear. It’s about time.

## *Man-to-Man*

- “We must teach younger men how to be men.”
- “The root cause is that men enable other men.”
- “Men are able to police each other’s behavior much better than women are.”
- “It’s men who need to rise to the occasion to break the narratives amongst other men.”

Change begins with individuals. Men holding other men accountable is where real change will happen. Because, “there’s a tribalism to it that I think is important.” Leverage the tribalism that “enable(s) other men,” while acknowledging that men really do have the power to stop a lot of the “bad behavior that is swept under the rug.” Act now, knowing that change will be most effective man-to-man.

## *The Center of Gravity*

- “Stop hiring people like yourselves.” • “Hire people who will push your culture.” • “If you see something. Say something.”
- “No forced arbitration.” • “Be transparent and don’t hide.” • “End the culture of concealment.” • Commit to “pay equity.”
- Use “Free the Work” to hire talent. • “Give us a bill of rights, codes of conduct.” • “Mentor women... and mostly women of color.”
- “Create brave spaces both physically and emotionally.” • “Create a culture that is better at creating belonging.”
- “Build a narrative around the outsized importance of diversity.” • Hire “people whose full-time job is to be cultural ambassadors.”
- “Look at the root cause as opposed to just naming and shaming symptomatic behavior.”

Advertising has a long history of allowing “everyone to bullshit their way around all this stuff.” But, it’s “on us (men) to change advertising culture.” The industry is ripe for “an industry-wide set of rules and practices the we believe in.” And that must include creating “safe places where women feel comfortable coming forward without any fear of retribution,” within agencies where action is taken against perpetrators and not against victims.

***“If you’re a man in a position of authority who can affect change,  
then fucking just do it.”***

*“The core illness hasn’t been cured.  
We keep treating the individual person  
as opposed to curing the disease.”*

## WHAT’S NEXT

For men the TU/A journey began with skepticism and a longing for guidance on building systemic accountability. While the issues of gender inequality and sexual harassment are bigger than advertising, that point of view also side-steps the reality of the “boys’ club” culture which has long shaped the very heart of the advertising industry. Until men own their part in perpetuating that culture, even if only with silence, the problems of gender inequities and sexual misconduct are not going to be solved. Not until men stop hiring people like themselves, start empowering HR to really do its job, speak truth, and participate fully in the embrace of equality will anything change.

The center of gravity has begun to shift. Advertising can no longer tinker at the margins. Change must come. Men must commit to equitable power-sharing and to zero-tolerance of sexual misconduct. Women must “let men in,” lest they keep “pushing water uphill.” So too, must women work to build “bridges of understanding between generations of women.” The industry is at a turning point. As one man poignantly shared, “my daughter often says to me – it’s on you dad.”

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Watch for my next white paper devoted exclusively to an exploration of the pressing need for diversity in advertising — informed by the insights of both women and men. To learn more about me or my work visit [GrowHer.blog](https://www.growher.blog). For past white papers or consulting please contact me at [jean.grow@gmail.com](mailto:jean.grow@gmail.com).

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